Engl. Poetry vol 63.

THE NATIVITY OF OUR SAVIOUR:

A POEM.

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Nil oriturum alias, nil ortum tale fatentes. Hor. ad Auguſtum.

Jam nova progenies cælo demittitur alto. Virgil, Ecl. 4. l. 7.

CAMBRIDGE,

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M.DCC.LXXVIII.

A Clauſe of Mr. SEATON's Will, Dated *Oct.* 8. 1738.

I Give my Kiſlingbury Eſtate to the Univerſity of Cambridge for ever: the Rents of which ſhall be diſpoſed of yearly by the Vice-Chancellor for the time being, as he the Vice-Chancellor, the Maſter of Clare-Hall, and the Greek Profeſſor for the time being, or any two of them ſhall agree. Which three perſons aforeſaid ſhall give out a Subject, which Subject ſhall for the firſt year be one or other of the Perfections or Attributes of the Supreme Being, and ſo the ſucceeding Years, till the Subject is exhauſted; and afterwards the Subject ſhall be either Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell, Purity of Heart, &c. or whatever elſe may be judged by the Vice-Chancellor, Maſter of Clare-Hall, and Greek Profeſſor, to be moſt conducive to the honour of the Supreme Being and recommendation of Virtue. And they ſhall yearly diſpoſe of the Rent of the above Eſtate to that Maſter of Arts, whoſe Poem on the Subject given ſhall be beſt approved by them. Which Poem I ordain to be always in Engliſh, and to be printed; the expence of which ſhall be deducted out of the product of the Eſtate, and the reſidue given as a reward for the Compoſer of the Poem, or Ode, or Copy of Verſes.

WE the underwritten, do aſſign Mr. SEATON's Prize for the Year 1778, to SAMUEL HAYES, M. A. for his Poem on *The Nativity of our Saviour*; and direct the ſaid Poem to be printed according to the Tenor of the Will.

Oct. 19. 1778.

R. Plumptre, Vice-Chancellor.
P. S. Goddard, Maſter of Clare-Hall.

THE NATIVITY.

WHERE's now the Muſe, which erſt in Greece and Rome
Inſpir'd the virtuous breaſt? Whether the verſe
Taught the mild duties of domeſtick life;
Or when th' indignant Foe in dread array
Marſhall'd his num'rous Hoſts, the patriot ſtrain
Aſſerted injur'd Freedom's cauſe, call'd forth
Virtue's pure flame, and rais'd th' heroick ſoul
Triumphant o'er the coward fears of death?
No more, alas! to themes like theſe the Lyre
Is ſtrung: The Muſe, which nobly ſoaring, ſought
The publick good, now to the ſordid ſhrine
Of private int'reſt ſtoops. Satire, deſign'd
To curb the bold career of ſhameleſs vice,

A Regardleſs

Regardleſs of its glorious function, throws
Th' envenom'd ſhaft at random: Calumny
Not juſtice now directs its flight: Where that,
Or where the proſtituted luſt of gold,
Point out the mark, though innocence may bleed,
Domeſtick bliſs through life's extended term
To wretchedneſs become a prey; though worth,
'Till then unſullied, be a publick butt
For ſcorn's fell arrows, ſtill the caitiff Wretch,
Foul envy's hireling, with vindictive hand
Scatters the baneful poiſon. — O how long,
Ye ſons of Britain, ſhall the dignity
Of verſe be thus debas'd? Aſſert your fame;
Nor let the Fiend of ſlander ſeize the place
For virtue meant! Far other thoughts were thine,
Thrice-honour'd SEATON; by the pureſt flame
Of true religion fir'd, through ev'ry age
You bade the Muſe her annual off'ring bring
In honor of creation's Lord: He, thron'd
On the bleſt ſeat of mercy, if the heart
Be pure, vouchſafes all-gracious to accept
The tributary mite. — O then awake,

My

My ſoul, in fervent raptures pour the note
Of praiſe to the ſupernal King! And thou,
Cœleſtial Spirit, thou who deign'ſt to dwell
In human breaſt, O animate my verſe!
Teach me to ſing his love, his wond'rous love
Who left the realms of everlaſting light,
And, lowly Viſitant on earth, for Man
Journey'd through poverty's unſhelter'd vale;
For Man's apoſtate race became the Son
Of ſharp diſtreſs, and for them bow'd his head
To the dire pains of th' ignominious Croſs!

'Twas night, ſtill night; nor Moon, nor glimm'ring Stars
Shone in th' expanſe of Heav'n; wide thro' thy fields,
Judæa, ſilence reign'd; no ſound is heard,
Save where the bleating of the tender flocks
Pierces the gloomy ſhades; around the folds
The watchful Shepherds, types of induſtry,
Examples of protecting love, attend:
Careful, leſt in the dead and lonely hour
Of darkneſs, the gaunt Wolf, by hunger driv'n,
Should leap the fence, and with deſtructive fangs

Commit dread ravage: They, their eyes unſeal'd
By ſleep's oppreſſive lethargy, thus guard
Their fleecy care. Lo! through the ſever'd clouds
A tide of ſplendor burſts; æthereal light,
Surpaſſing far the luſtre of the Sun,
What time in plenitude of pow'r he flames
In his meridian height, breaks from the vault
Of Heav'n; ſuch glory from the burning buſh
Shot forth, when great Jehovah with the Son
Of Amram to hold converſe deign'd. On earth
Harrow'd with fear the Shepherds proſtrate fall.
Cloth'd in cœleſtial robe, 'midſt the bright rays
An Angel from above deſcending, thus
In accents of mild love diſpels their dread:
" Fear not, ye Shepherds! From th' almighty King
" I come not now an inſtrument of wrath,
" And vengeance; nor does my commiſſion'd arm
" Bear the exterminating bolt. Of old,
" When Iſrael's wayward Sons rebellious turn'd
" From the commanded law, and bent the knee
" To molten gold, terrifick then appear'd
" Angelick Miniſters, amidſt the tribes

" Scat-

" Scatt'ring diſcomfiture and wild diſmay.
" But hence, far hence be war's alarms! No more
" The trumpet calls to battle; through the world
" No more by conteſt rent, auſpicious peace,
" Tranquillity like that which Poets ſing
" In magick numbers of the golden age,
" Sheds her diffuſive bleſſings. From the Lord
" Propitious Meſſenger of good I come
" To Juda's pious race. Ariſe confirm'd;
" Shake off deſponding terror! Lo! I bring
" Tidings of comfort and great joy. This day
" In David's city unto you is born
" A Sov'reign King, the Virgin's promis'd Son,
" Mankind's Redeemer: He, whom ancient Seers,
" By holy viſion fir'd, declar'd ſhould come,
" And from the dreary cave of vanquiſh'd death
" Reſcue Man's forfeit Soul. To Bethlehem ſtraight
" Your ſteps direct; there ſhall ye find the Babe,
" From whom theſe bleſſings, theſe predicted joys
" Now ſpring; nor deem the lowly reſidence
" Diſgraceful to your Prince, him ſhall ye find,
" Though Heir of Heav'n within a manger laid."

He

He ſaid, and ſuddenly the air reſounds
With noiſe of ruſhing pinions; from the throne
Of God, through the refulgent concave ſweep
Th' angelick Hoſt, a multitude immenſe
Of Spirits aërial with dilated wings
Filling the radiant circuit. They in hymns
Of praiſe, to Man announce the grand event,
Redemption's dawn: " All glory be on high
" To God, all domination, pow'r ſupreme,
" Sole empire o'er creation's ſpacious round!
" May peace on earth, th' indiſſoluble chain
" Of amity and concord bind the hearts
" Of Men, the froward arrogance of pride
" Repreſs, check paſſion's fev'rous heat, and bend
" To the mild yoke of Chriſt the humbled ſoul!"
Ye Sons of Men ariſe; ſhake off the bonds
Of ſin, and with ſeraphick rapture fir'd
Join in the ſacred Chorus! Angels ſing
The hymn of Glory; they who faithful ſtood,
In their high office clear, firm and unmov'd
In their allegiance, when revolt ſeduc'd
Th' apoſtate Cherubim; They who oppos'd

Th' embattl'd ranks of vaunting Satan, laud
Jehovah's mercy; and ſhall ingrate Man
For whom that mercy flow'd, who by foul guilt
Drew down perdition on his rebel head,
And op'd the gates of death, eternal death,
'Till God's own Son, unblemiſh'd victim, gave
Himſelf a ſacrifice, and by his blood
Upon the Croſs pour'd forth, waſh'd out the ſtains
Of primal ſin; ſhall Man, for whom the fount
Of heav'nly goodneſs living waters gave
To ſlake the fever of the thirſty ſoul,
Shall he be ſilent here, forget the debt,
The proffer'd bleſſing ſlight, nor to the Prince
Of life, the tributary honors, praiſe,
Homage, and adoration, ſuppliant bring?
Forbid it Gratitude! Let ev'ry tie
Which binds the human breaſt to acts of Love,
And mutual kindneſs, here be doubly ſtrong!
Man from his Brother ſeeks the juſt return
For mild benevolence; with lib'ral hand
If he in ſtern neceſſity's ſharp pinch
Shelters the wand'ring Orphan, and averts,

Benignant

Benignant guardian, poverty's cold blaſt
From the yet tender bloſſom, claims he not
The grateful tribute of affection, warm
From th' inmoſt heart? Shall Man from Man exact
Theſe offices of love, as his juſt due
Claim them, as his unalienable right?
And we, who all for benefits beyond
Compare to Chriſt indebted ſtand, who owe
To him immortal life, the heritage
Of never fading bliſs, ſhall we be dumb
In ſuch a theme of mercy? Let him be
Accurs'd, from ſocial intercourſe cut off,
Exil'd from Men, who with obdurate pride,
Vile ingrate, to his meek Redeemer's ſhrine,
Th' appointed pledge, the inward ſacrifice
Of love and true contrition, dares deny.
Ye vain, deluded Scepticks, who, miſled
By reaſon's unſubſtantial twilight, plunge
In doubt's profound abyſs, whoſe ſhallow ſenſe,
Oft as it turns to Nature's ſimpleſt works,
Stands puzzled and confounded; yet upborne
By light preſumption's wing, into the realms

Of ſpace unbounded, infinite, ye ſoar!
Reaſon's contracted eye, too weak to bear
Th' effulgent blaze of light, too dim to ſee
The ſev'ral links of that ſtupendous chain
Which Providence hath form'd, on which depends
The beauteous order of exhauſtleſs worlds;
Reaſon's dim eye, from that which it beholds,
That ſingle link here offer'd to its view,
Imaginary imperfection frames
In the grand whole: Thus inſolent arraigns
The ſtructure of Redemption's vaſt machine,
And queſtions Nature's King.— Hence, airy thoughts,
Viſions of the diſtemper'd brain! Dar'ſt thou,
Vile reptile, thus to the æthereal vault
Preſumptuous ſoar? Thou child of ignorance,
To the dread throne ſubmiſſive bow! 'Tis thine
Suppliant to fall, not queſtion the decrees
Of everlaſting Wiſdom. O adore
That mercy, which hath deign'd thy ſteps to lead
Through error's labyrinth to the bright path
Of truth and happineſs, hath made thee heir
Of immortality's cœleſtial crown! —

Why then, exclaims the Infidel, (fond Slave
To weak imagination's empty dream)
Did not the God of mercy, if he deign'd
To give his Son, in radiant glory ſend
Redemption's Prince, high 'midſt the clouds enthron'd,
With all the enſigns of Jehovah's pow'r,
To flaſh conviction on the doubting breaſt?
Why in th' unconſcious hour of ſilent night
To Shepherds publiſh that, which to the world,
The whole extended world, glad tidings brought
Of comfort and eternal joy? Why not
In the full Sanhedrim to Juda's Seers
Publiſh the grand event, the gracious birth
Of that great Prince, who ſhould from Jeſſe ſpring
Sole Sov'reign of Mankind? And doſt thou weigh,
O'erweening captious Mortal, Heav'n's decrees
In thy defective ſcale? Had Chriſt appear'd
Confeſt the Son of God, enthron'd in clouds,
In all the brightneſs of paternal pow'r
Sublime, fear might have ſeiz'd the conſcious breaſt,
And from it wrung belief: What virtue thus
From terror to believe? Where then had been

The teſt of faith, if the expanded arm
Of Heav'n, in glory and in pow'r diſplay'd,
Had curb'd the freedom of the human will,
Not left the ſcope of choice! *Th' almighty King,
Not always in the ſplendid ſcene of pomp
Tremendous, on the ſounding tempeſt rides,
Or ſweeping whirlwind; nor in th' awful peal
Of ecchoing thunder is he always heard,
Or ſeen in lightning's livid flames, but oft,
When ev'ry turbid element is huſh'd,
In the ſtill voice of Nature ſtands confeſt
The Lord omnipotent. — Doſt thou, vain Man,
Think that it derogates from God's dread name
To ſend Redemption's Herald in the ſhades
Of night to humble Shepherds? Rather 'midſt
Aſſembled Peers his majeſty requires
That ſuch glad tidings in the eye of day
Should to the world be publiſh'd. Froward pride
How weak thy judgment! By terreſtrial views
Fondly inſpir'd, to honors and to wealth
Thou join'ſt reſpect, diſdainful looking down
E'en upon ſacred virtue's ſelf, if poor.

* 19th Chap. 1ſt Book of Kings, 11 & 12 Ver.

Hence thus of God thou think'ſt; preſumptuous think'ſt
Of his unſearchable, unbounded ways
By earth's contracted paths. Shall that ſupreme,
That ſelf-exiſtent Being, to whoſe law
Creation bows, to whom, whate'er on earth,
Or in the ſecret channels of the deep,
Or in the infinite expanſe above
Exiſts, its life and preſervation owes,
Shall that high being in the narrow ſphere
Of our affections move, with niggard love
Sole favor to the rich ſhall he diſpenſe,
Spurning the humble, undiſſembled pray'r
Of ſuppliant poverty? Nor judge ſo mean
Of lowly Shepherds! In the tranquil days
Of th' infant world, ere yet contagious vice
Rankled within the tainted heart, to tend
The flocks in royalty itſelf was deem'd
No office of diſgrace: E'en Jeſſe's Son
From 'midſt the folds to the exalted throne
Of ſov'reignty was call'd, the throne from whence
The bleſſings of Salvation ſhould deſcend.
How fitting then, that the auſpicious birth

Of Chriſt, benignant Shepherd of the ſoul,
Should thus be publiſh'd! And yet even thus
Deem not Meſſiah of atteſting pow'r,
Of Evidence diveſted came! Explore
The living oracles, the long-drawn roll
Of ancient records trace, attentive view
Pourtray'd in truth's ſtrong colors ev'ry type
Of him who was to come, the Prince of Peace,
Mankind's triumphant Saviour! In th' archives
Of old vouchſaf'd to the benighted times
Of mental darkneſs, ſee we ought of Pomp,
The vain parade of wealth, the diadem,
Trappings of earthborn royalty, foretold
In the meek reign of Chriſt? Rejected, ſcorn'd,
Deſpis'd, a Man of ſorrow and diſtreſs,
To all the ills which poverty's chill cold,
Or pow'r of tyrant malice could inflict,
Expos'd a victim, through life's wretched vale
Our bleſt Redeemer paſs'd. Tho' ſcorn'd, contemn'd,
By ſigns and wonders manifeſt, approv'd
Th' anointed King, David's predicted Son. —
The great Meſſiah comes, though not array'd

In dread magnificence, a Viſitant
Expected by Mankind he comes. To th' Eaſt
The conſcious nations turn; from thence expect
A Pow'r ſhould then in ſplendor riſe, ſhould claim
Th' expanded empire of the ſubject globe.
E'en in the ſtable's lowly reſidence,
When in the manger lay the Lord of Life,
Lo! where the Magi, from the eaſtern clime
Led by the ſhining ſtar, their choiceſt gifts,
Propitiatory odors ſuppliant bring;
And meekly at the Infant's bleſſed feet,
With adoration and with hymns of praiſe,
Arabia's tributary honors lay.
O with them let us, bending low before
The throne of grace, th' appointed tribute bring,
Th' accepted incenſe of the grateful heart!
From realms far diſtant, they, by lively faith
Inſpir'd, to Bethlehem came: In wiſdom's lore
Though deeply read, ſkill'd in the potent arts
Of magick, though in Nature's hidden depths,
And dark myſterious operations vers'd,
They ſuppliant came, and to the infant God

In mark of reverential homage bow'd.
Shall we in this enlighten'd æra, when
The gloom of mental darkneſs by the rays
Of truth's bright ſun flies ſcatter'd, when no doubt,
Save what preſuming arrogance creates,
Is left; ſhall we to genial light prefer
Error's inhoſpitable ſhades, and Heirs
Of Paradiſe, to this contracted ſpot,
This viſionary ſcene of empty joy,
This theatre of baſeleſs folly, fix
Our grov'ling hopes? Unbounded mercy calls,
From Eaſt to Weſt, from North to South proclaims
Tidings of Good, Salvation's promis'd dawn.
O if within the breaſt a thought ſurvive
Which merits wiſdom's name, a thought which aims
At real bliſs, ye Sons of Men obey
The ſacred call! While Heav'n, in gracious love
Unlimited, yet deigns to grant the hour
Of penitence, awake to life; arreſt
The preſent moment, leſt the tranſient ſcene
For ever cloſe! Doth opulence invite,
Do earthly honors your attention claim,

Though

Though threat'ning dangers riſe on ev'ry ſide,
In ſuch purſuit no dangers can appal
Your animated ſoul; through the rough ſea
Of peril with undaunted heart ye ruſh
In queſt of the frail momentary prize.
Will ye all this for viſionary good
Attempt, nor once beyond the grave extend
The ſerious thought? There, and there only bloom
Subſtantial pleaſures, and exhauſtleſs bliſs.
O then to th' everliving Son of God,
From whoſe tranſcendant mercy the loſt race
Of Adam, Heav'n and all its treaſures claim;
To him, with reverential joy inſpir'd,
Fall proſtrate, and the heart's meek tribute pay.
Oft as on earth a Prince is born, Mankind
Exulting ſhout; to the enraptur'd thought
Imagination's vivid pencil paints
The future Heroe; forms him all divine,
The ſtate's firm pillar, ſcourge of warring hoſts,
The guard, the Father of his native land.
Vain tranſitory bliſs! Fond fancy's God
At laſt perhaps his country's Tyrant proves,

Subverter

Subverter of its laws, Patron of vice,
Inſulted virtue's ſanguinary foe.
Not ſuch the Prince of peace: Bleſſings ſupreme,
Unlimited, eternal flow from him.
Time which deſpotick o'er ſublunar things,
Blaſts the frail pageantry of mortal pride,
Which will in everlaſting ruins whelm
The world's capacious orb, will only tend
To raiſe the glories of Meſſiah's reign,
To add new luſtre to the realms of light.

He comes not in the pride of martial pomp,
High in triumphal chariot, while around
The poor remains of vanquiſh'd Kingdoms grace
The trophied car; not ſuch as Juda's Sons
By empire's flatt'ring dream miſled, conceiv'd,
Vindictive Monarch over proſtrate Rome.
Beyond the confines of this nether world,
At the right hand of the almighty Sire
Enthron'd he ſits; no partial King; to all
Who unfeign'd homage offer he benign
The treaſures of his boundleſs love vouchſafes.

Though by the Prophets' holy raptures fir'd
The glowing mind may in rich fancy form
Æthereal bliſs, how faint the proſpect drawn
From fancy's brighteſt ſtores! Eye hath not ſeen,
Ear hath not heard, nor can the human heart
Thoſe Joys conceive, which, bliſsful heritage,
Chriſt for his faithful votaries prepares.

No more, thou Infidel, with captious breath
To queſtion Heav'n preſume! Be ev'ry knee
To Chriſt in homage bent, be ev'ry heart
In adoration and in fervent pray'r
To Chriſt pour'd forth! From his all gracious birth
The day-ſpring from on high deſcends: Grim Death,
Stript of his boaſted empire, vanquiſh'd falls:
The cearments of the dank victorious grave
Are burſt aſunder: Th' adamantine gates
Of Paradiſe unbarr'd: Man's forfeit race,
From the deep gulph of Erebus redeem'd,
To life to immortality ariſe. ——